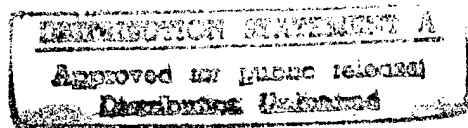


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Maximizing the Psychological Effects of Airpower: Lessons from Past Wars

The psychological effects of air operations can help shorten wars and reduce their costs, particularly in lives. In some conflict situations, these effects may in fact exceed the physical effects in importance.

In *Psychological Effects of U.S. Air Operations in Four Wars, 1941–1991: Lessons for U.S. Commanders*, Stephen T. Hosmer focuses on two types of air operations—those aimed at strategic targets and those aimed at deployed forces—whose psychological effects may significantly reduce the duration and intensity of an enemy's resistance.

The research drew on interrogations of enemy deserters and prisoners of war and on other data to examine the psychological effects of air operations in the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf wars and, to a lesser extent, World War II. Analysis of these wars yielded lessons on how U.S. commanders might prepare for, plan, and conduct psychologically effective air operations.

OPERATIONS AGAINST STRATEGIC TARGETS

In all major conflicts from World War II on, the United States has engaged in air attacks on strategic targets, including targets in or near the enemy's capital, to reduce an adversary's capacity to wage war. At the same time, these attacks have sought to produce psychological effects, such as inducing the enemy to halt aggression, withdraw its forces, negotiate for a truce or peace, or capitulate. Experience suggests that, while such attacks can provide important coercive leverage, they are unlikely by themselves to secure U.S. war aims. Lessons for commanders include the following:

Expect limits on the coercive effects of strategic attacks. Commanders should anticipate that enemy strengths and U.S. self-imposed constraints—such as those

stemming from the desire to minimize civilian casualties—will limit the potential coercive leverage of air attacks.

Plan on multiple pressures to secure war aims. In the past, attacks or threatened attacks against enemy strategic targets have helped to persuade enemy leaders to terminate wars on terms acceptable to the United States only when the enemy leaders have perceived that

- they faced defeat or stalemate on the battlefield
- continued fighting would not improve the peace terms
- the damage from attacks or threatened attacks was likely to be much more costly than the concessions demanded
- they had no prospect of mounting an effective defense or riposte.

To force capitulation, an additional condition will probably also be needed: the removal from power of the leaders who started the war.

Consider enemy deployed forces a strategic target. Because battlefield prospects are likely to weigh heavily on decisions to continue fighting, U.S. commanders should consider the enemy's deployed forces a strategic target. In every major conflict from World War II on, enemies have capitulated or acceded to U.S. peace terms only after serious battlefield defeats.

Improve U.S. capabilities to attack high-value targets. Coercive air attacks should focus on highly valued targets. Almost all enemy leaders are likely to value retention of power and personal survival highly. To create negotiating leverage, an air campaign might aim to persuade enemy leaders that they are likely to die, be overthrown by internal forces, or be removed by external forces if they refuse to yield. The credibility enemy lead-

ers attach to such risks will depend in large part on their perception of the U.S. will, capability, and freedom to turn such threats into reality.

OPERATIONS AGAINST DEPLOYED FORCES

Air operations can decisively affect the morale and battlefield behavior of deployed forces by causing enemy troops to desert, surrender, flee, or refuse to man their weapons. Three conditions have consistently produced large-scale surrenders and a catastrophic disintegration of enemy resistance: when enemy forces (1) were subjected to effective air and other bombardment for several weeks, (2) suffered severe food shortages because of the bombing of their lines of communications and supply vehicles, and (3) confronted timely U.S. and allied ground attacks that exploited their collapsing morale. Lessons for commanders include the following:

Emphasize psychological aspects of airpower.

Commanders need to devote increased attention to the psychological dimensions of warfare in the training of their forces and in the planning and conduct of their operations.

Adopt an overall campaign strategy that promotes psychologically effective attacks. Commanders should pursue battlefield strategies that force enemy ground units to react in a manner that will expose them to prolonged and psychologically effective aerial attacks.

Make demoralization an air campaign objective. The air component commander should make the destruction of enemy morale a priority objective, and air campaign planning staffs should include personnel expert in psychological effects.

Employ concepts of operation that maximize psychological effects. These include concepts of operation designed to keep enemy forces under constant attack or threat of attack for prolonged periods; to deny them food by attacking supply depots, lines of communication, and supply vehicles; to use heavy bombers for surprise and shock effects; to convince enemy troops that their air defenses are impotent; and to condition them to believe

that it is dangerous to operate or remain with weapons and other equipment. Maintaining attack aircraft day and night over all sectors of the battlefield may require a large force.

Develop weapons that increase airpower's psychological impact. Particularly strong psychological effects might be derived from new sensors and weapons that allow detection and effective attack of artillery and mortars immediately upon their firing and of personnel and equipment positioned in camouflaged, hardened emplacements or under heavy foliage.

Exploit the psychological effects of airpower with timely ground operations. Because weaknesses in the cohesion and morale of enemy deployed forces are likely to be temporary and subject to repair, ground offensives should be mounted promptly to exploit the psychological vulnerabilities that have been created by air attacks.

Integrate Psychological Operations (PSYOP) with air attacks. Military operations and PSYOP messages should be closely integrated and coordinated. Air attacks can enhance the credibility and receptivity of PSYOP messages. PSYOP can be used to solidify and exploit perceptions created by air attacks.

Know enemy psychological strengths and vulnerabilities. Commanders must ensure that enemy motivation and morale receive high priority in prisoner and deserter interrogations. The Air Force should develop a cohort of PSYOP specialists and psychologically oriented intelligence specialists, including trained interrogators, to work with Army personnel in conducting and evaluating prisoner and deserter interrogations, in designing PSYOP messages, and in assessing the psychological impact of air and other military operations.

Begin psychological conditioning in peacetime. The Air Force and other U.S. military services have two main reasons for advertising their capabilities to potential adversaries during peacetime: to deter would-be aggressors from attacking U.S. interests and to begin the psychological softening of potential adversaries in the event of war.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for RAND's Project AIR FORCE; it is documented in Psychological Effects of U.S. Air Operations in Four Wars, 1941-1991: Lessons for U.S. Commanders, by Stephen T. Hosmer, MR-576-AF, 1996, 220 pp., ISBN 0-8330-2336-5, and is available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org/>). Publications are distributed to the trade by National Book Network. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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